

**STATEMENT OF JONATHAN B. JARVIS, DIRECTOR, NATIONAL PARK SERVICE,
DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR, BEFORE THE SUBCOMMITTEE ON PUBLIC
LANDS AND ENVIRONMENTAL REGULATION OF THE HOUSE NATURAL
RESOURCES COMMITTEE CONCERNING PUBLIC IMPACTS OF CLOSING
AMENITIES AT YOSEMITE NATIONAL PARK.**

July 9, 2013

Mr. Chairman and members of the committee, I appreciate this opportunity to appear before you today to discuss the management of Yosemite National Park and specifically, the *Merced Wild and Scenic River Draft Comprehensive Management Plan and Environmental Impact Statement (Draft MRP)*.

Set aside by Abraham Lincoln on June 30, 1864, for its exquisite natural and cultural resources, Yosemite National Park is a crown jewel of the National Park System. The park, set in the Sierra Nevada mountain range, includes a glacially carved valley with granite cliffs, spectacular waterfalls, and gigantic sequoia trees, and hosts over 4 million visitors annually who engage in many forms of recreation. Its preservation is a testament to America's commitment "*to conserve the scenery and the natural and historic objects and the wild life therein... unimpaired for the enjoyment of future generations.*" The importance of this magnificent national park is reflected in the nearly \$400 million in tourism-related dollars the park generates to the regional and local economies of California. It is also reflected in the intense interest in any planning process by the public.

The Merced River and Yosemite Valley corridor, within Yosemite National Park, provides for a variety of opportunities to view the valley's magnificent scenery and to travel along the river and interact directly with it. The most common visitor activities in Yosemite Valley include scenic viewing, day hiking, wildlife viewing, picnicking, creative arts, camping, ranger-led programs, bicycling, floating, nature study, and rock climbing. Both day-use and overnight camping and lodging are available, and campground sites in Yosemite Valley are in very high demand and often fill to capacity.

The Merced River runs through the heart of Yosemite Valley. In 1987, through the enactment of P.L. 100-149, Congress and the President recognized the importance of this free-flowing river and designated 122 miles of it as a Wild and Scenic River, 81 miles of which course through Yosemite National Park. That act required that the National Park Service (NPS) issue a Comprehensive Wild and Scenic River Management Plan in order to protect and enhance the outstandingly remarkable values for which the river was designated.

The planning process we are here to discuss today, the Draft MRP, is the third management plan the NPS has prepared for the Merced Wild and Scenic River within Yosemite National Park. In 2009, the NPS settled a long-running lawsuit challenging the adequacy of the two prior versions of the MRP (prepared in 2000 and 2005). Consistent with the 2009 Settlement Agreement, the

NPS is working on completing a new comprehensive management plan for the Merced Wild and Scenic River.

This most recent planning process for the Draft MRP began with public scoping on June 30, 2009, and reflects the terms of the 2009 Settlement Agreement. It represents a large amount of collaboration among the public, research scientists, park partners and park staff. The alternatives included in the Draft MRP bring forward the best science and stewardship to set management direction for the river corridor for the next 20-30 years.

The NPS must consider many factors in completing the MRP. Interagency guidelines for implementing the Wild and Scenic Rivers Act direct that, whenever feasible, major public use facilities are to be located outside the river corridor. In addition, the U.S. Court of Appeals for the Ninth Circuit, in its March 2008 opinion, instructed the park to ensure that the kinds and amounts of use allowed in the corridor were consistent with the protection of outstandingly remarkable values. It also stated that there was “no authority for a presumption that holding facility levels to those in existence in 1987” was protective of outstandingly remarkable values or satisfied the user capacity component of the Comprehensive Management Plan. The Court of Appeals pointed to the existence of several commercial activities and equated them with “degradation.” To address the Court’s concerns, park management needed to carefully evaluate all facilities and services to determine the feasibility of locating them outside of the river corridor.

Yosemite Valley is narrow with an area that is limited by a river corridor in the center and the known hazard of rock falls on either side. The Draft MRP had to consider these limits when analyzing space allocation for structures and facilities. As a safety measure for those who visit and work in Yosemite Valley, structures, cabins, and campsites that have a high risk of being affected by rock-fall would be phased out or relocated.

The draft preferred alternative, which was released for public review and comment on January 8, 2013, represents a balance between resource protection and providing for visitor use and access. Extensive public outreach was conducted by the park that included 66 public meetings, 20 press releases, 12 webinars, and a dedicated website. The public comment period, which ended on April 30, 2013, was 112 days—52 days longer than required by NPS policy. During that period, the park received nearly 30,000 public comments. Areas of interest raised by the public include visitor use management in Yosemite Valley, transportation, ecological restoration, camping, other recreational opportunities, infrastructure and development (both visitor and administrative), and user capacity.

The Draft MRP analyzes a wide range of alternatives. The range of alternatives presented would improve the condition of sensitive meadows and archeological resources, while retaining many of the historical amenities and recreational experiences for visitors to Yosemite Valley. The Draft MRP incorporates a robust monitoring program to evaluate the success of restoration goals and adapt management actions accordingly.

Overall, the Draft MRP will:

- Reaffirm the Merced Wild and Scenic River's boundaries and segment classifications.

- Identify the outstandingly remarkable values that are the unique, rare, or exemplary river-related characteristics that made the Merced River a Wild and Scenic River.
- Document baseline conditions for the Merced River's outstandingly remarkable values, water quality, and free-flowing condition and identify the management actions necessary to protect and enhance them.
- Develop a program of ongoing studies and monitoring to ensure management objectives are met.
- Establish a user-capacity program that addresses the kinds and amounts of use that the river corridor can sustain while protecting and enhancing river values.
- Revise Yosemite's 1980 *General Management Plan* to be consistent with the 2013 MRP.

The Draft MRP's preferred alternative proposes to:

- Preserve access to Yosemite Valley at current levels (allowing peak visitation to reach roughly 20,000 people per day) through private vehicles (primarily), transit, and commercial tour bus access.
- Increase camping availability by 174 new camp sites in Yosemite Valley.
- Maintain lodging availability at the present level.
- Preserve an extraordinary array of recreation opportunities including bicycling, rafting, private stock use, hiking, climbing, and camping both within and outside of the river corridor.
- Restore more than 200 acres of meadow and riparian habitat.
- Outline a long-term program to reverse site-specific impacts from past patterns of visitor use.
- Remove and/or redesign facilities that are subject to flooding and rock fall.
- Substantially reduce traffic congestion and crowding through organized and efficient parking for day-use visitors and improvements to the circulation system within Yosemite Valley. The improved circulation system would address critical intersections with either a pedestrian underpass or re-routed segments of roadways coupled with traffic-calming design.
- Maintain Yosemite's contribution to local and regional economies.

We believe that the Draft MRP's preferred alternative would retain the essence of Yosemite Valley while ensuring that the experiences enjoyed by generations of families are sustained over time. Visitors would continue to have access to Yosemite Valley by private vehicle while enjoying increased public transit and expanded shuttle bus service that leads to decreased traffic congestion. The heart of Yosemite Valley would be reclaimed for visitor use and enjoyment, creating a sense of arrival with the redesign of the primary day-use parking area and the relocation of commercial and administrative functions. Recommendations from professional traffic engineers would be implemented to improve circulation, reduce congestion, and provide for a higher quality visitor experience. We feel that these improvements can be attained while increasing protection for the Wild and Scenic River corridor.

While the Draft MRP encompasses 81 miles of the Merced Wild and Scenic River within Yosemite National Park, the greatest preponderance of attention and comments generated during the public comment period were focused on Yosemite Valley. In particular, many expressed concern about the possible elimination of some commercial recreation activities such as bike and

raft rentals, ice skating, horseback day-rides and swimming pools. As Yosemite National Park proceeds to complete the final MRP, all comments about recreational uses and other aspects of the plan will be thoroughly considered and evaluated. In some instances, these commercial services may be reasonably relocated outside the river corridor but remain in Yosemite Valley, or in other locations inside or outside of the park, and available to park visitors. It is important to note that no reductions are proposed in any alternative for the private use of horses, bikes, and rafts.

Due to the extensive nature of the comments and extraordinary importance of Yosemite to the American public and the region, the park is seeking a short extension of the court-ordered deadline to produce a Record of Decision. We anticipate the publication of the final MRP in the late fall of 2013. After the final MRP is released to the public, the park will host a public meeting to present changes between the draft and final plans.

From my years as the Regional Director for the Pacific West Region, I know that every planning process in Yosemite is challenging because people care so passionately about the park. I also know that we all share two goals: First, to ensure that the public will continue to be able to enjoy the variety of recreational opportunities that the river and its surrounding areas offer; and second, to preserve the resources of one of America's 203 Wild and Scenic Rivers so it will be there for our children and grandchildren to appreciate.

Mr. Chairman, this concludes my statement. I would be pleased to respond to any questions you or the other members of the committee may have.